

Councillor guide on fire safety for use during estate visits

MAKING SURE ESTATES ARE SAFE FROM FIRE

Local authorities play a vital role in ensuring fire safety within their borough. Where the local authority is itself a responsible person for a property under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 it has a legal duty to keep properties safe from fire. This includes the common areas of purpose-built blocks of flats or maisonettes that make up estates.

Risk assessments

Local authorities, ALMOs and housing associations need to ensure that there is a **comprehensive fire risk assessment** for each of its purpose-built blocks of flats or maisonettes.

A fire risk assessment helps identify all the fire hazards and risks in the property so that decisions can be made on whether any risks identified are acceptable or whether something needs to be done to reduce or control them. You can ask:

- Where is the risk assessment for this building?
How often is it reviewed?
- Who carries out these risk assessments and what are their qualifications?



Confirming the emergency evacuation plan is in place

Purpose-built blocks of flats or maisonettes are designed and built as self-contained residential units usually sharing common corridors, staircases and an entrance. They can be of any height, not just high-rise. In purpose-built blocks of flats and maisonettes the 'stay put' principle applies. This means that if a fire starts in the common parts or in another flat, all residents not directly affected by the fire would be expected to 'stay put' and remain in their flat unless directed to leave by the fire and rescue service.

There should also be an **emergency evacuation plan** in place for each building. This details the action that residents and others need to take if there is a fire. This plan must make sure residents and others are safe, that a fire can be detected and that residents are warned of this event. Residents should be able to safely escape from a fire using routes within the building designed and maintained

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to be safe to use during an emergency. There should be appropriate signposting and lighting in place on these routes. There is a responsibility to inform tenants about the evacuation measures and safe behaviours for properties. You can ask:

- What emergency evacuation plan is in place for this building?
- How have residents been informed about it?
- Are fire escapes and other parts of the escape route, such as corridors and stairwells checked regularly for obstructions?
- Is emergency lighting and signage in place along the escape route?

Making sure staff know their responsibilities and where to get advice

It is crucial that those involved in the day-to-day management of estates have fire safety in mind when they are working on the estate. If they don't then new risks may go unreported and undealt with. You can ask:

- Do estate wardens have any formal objectives on fire safety?
- Are the estate services team in contact with the local fire station? Have they planned or delivered any joint initiatives together?
- Is information passed on to the fire brigade or do the fire brigade ever join with estate inspections? Perhaps they should be invited?
- Do wardens and other officers on estates find that they get a fast response from other parts of the organisation when they report fire safety concerns?

Storage and rubbish

There should be policies to keep the common or shared areas clear, especially of items that could burn or be a potential fuel source for arson. You can ask:

- What is done to help people to store bikes and prams that can't be stored in communal areas?
- How often are rubbish chutes checked for blockages and bin areas for overflowing rubbish?
- Is there clear signage about where rubbish goes?
- What action is taken to deal quickly with unauthorised storage or dumping of rubbish?

Arson risk and security

Fires lit deliberately can cause a lot of damage as they can be lit using multiple points of ignition and at vulnerable points in the building. It is important that buildings are secure.

Entrance doors should be secure to prevent intruders entering. This should include doors to tank rooms, roof access, parking/garage/shed areas and electrical cupboards. This is particularly important for areas in roof spaces and basements because if doors are open and fire can spread easily to these places, it can lead to rapid spread of fire to other parts of the building. You can ask:

- How often is the security of the estate checked? Have there been any problems? Are communal areas in and around the block well lit?

Front doors of flats

In a shared residential building, the front doors of individual flats are an important part of the fire protection for the building. This is sometimes referred to as 'structural fire safety'. Often, the front doors of individual flats perform a function as part of the protection for the routes used for escape from corridors and staircases in blocks of flats. These doors need to be fit-for-purpose, close fitting with no gaps, no warping and not damaged in any way. Do all the flat front doors look the same? If they don't this could be because residents have replaced them. You can ask:

- Do all the front doors in this block meet the appropriate standard?

Multiple layers of paint

Where paint is allowed to build up into multiple layers, this can allow very rapid fire spread as the paint splits and burns. In common areas this can compromise escape routes. You can ask:

- How many layers of paint are on the walls in common areas? Are they safe?

Dry risers

Dry risers are used to enable water to be delivered for firefighting purposes to all floors of high-rise buildings. The dry riser valves on the ground floor of a building are signposted for firefighters. If the dry riser valves are tampered with or damaged in any way it can cost fire crews vital seconds when they arrive at fires in high-rise blocks. You can ask:

- Are the dry risers checked regularly to see if they have been tampered with?

More information is available at
www.knowtheplan.co.uk

Your local fire safety team can answer queries and provide support. Contact details for the teams can be found here: www.london-fire.gov.uk/FireSafetyRegulationTeams.asp

Councillor guide on fire safety for use during council meetings

FIRE SAFETY IN PURPOSE-BUILT BLOCKS OF FLATS AND MAISONNETTES IN YOUR BOROUGH

Local authorities play a vital role in ensuring fire safety within their borough as community leaders, enforcing authorities, partners to the emergency services and as landlords themselves.

Local authorities as the responsible person

Where the local authority is itself a responsible person for a property under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 it has a legal duty to keep properties safe from fire. This includes the common areas of purpose-built blocks of flats or maisonettes.

This means that the local authority has to ensure that there is a **comprehensive fire risk assessment** for each of its buildings. A fire risk assessment helps identify all the fire hazards and risks in the property so that the responsible person can make a decision on whether any risks identified are acceptable or whether something needs to be done to reduce or control them.

There should also be an **emergency evacuation plan** in place for each building. This details the action that residents and others need to take if there is a fire. This plan must make sure residents and others are safe, that a fire can be



detected and that residents are warned of this event. Residents should be able to safely escape from a fire using routes within the building designed and maintained to be safe to use during an emergency. There should be appropriate signposting and lighting in place on these routes.

Purpose-built blocks of flats or maisonettes are designed and built as self-contained residential units usually sharing common corridors, staircases and entrance. Purpose-built blocks of flats and maisonettes can be of any height, not just high-rise. In these buildings the 'stay put' principle applies. This means that if a fire starts in the common parts or in another flat, all residents not directly affected by the fire would be expected to 'stay put' and remain in their flat unless directed to leave by the fire and rescue service.

More detailed information can be found at www.knowtheplan.co.uk

WHAT CAN COUNCILLORS DO?

Do not make assumptions that fire safety is being actively or effectively managed in purpose-built blocks of flats and maisonettes in your borough. Councillors can make their boroughs safer by scrutinising how responsibilities for fire safety are met and ensuring that the fire safety in your borough is continuously being monitored and improved.

STRATEGIC AND POLICY QUESTIONS FOR COUNCILLORS TO ASK

These are questions you should ask about the fire safety of purpose-built blocks of flats and maisonettes in your borough, particularly in relation to the residential estates and properties run by the local authority, ALMO or local housing associations. They can be asked generally or in the context of specific programmes and projects.

Some of the questions overlap in their focus but this does not matter – fire safety is a complicated area and involves many of the different professional disciplines involved in managing and maintaining a building.

- Where are the risk assessments carried out on local authority, ALMO or local housing association properties under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 held? How often are they reviewed? Who carries out these risk assessments and what are their qualifications?
- Are councillors told if the local authority, ALMO or a local housing association is the subject of enforcement action by London Fire Brigade?
- What contractual relationships are in place with leaseholders about their fire safety responsibilities, including for flat and maisonette front doors? By upholding their responsibilities, leaseholders have an impact on the shared means of escape for the building for all residents.
- Is there a clear process in place for residents to report and escalate concerns about fire safety?
- How do local authority employees with non-housing responsibilities (e.g. social services, carers, pest control etc.) report fire safety concerns about homes they have visited?
- What is in place to make sure that residents know what they need to do if there is a fire in their block or property? Do new residents receive this information in their welcome packs?
- Does the borough have clear policies stating that:
 - before any modifications or maintenance works are carried out in purpose-built blocks of flats or maisonettes, there must be proper assessment of the impact on fire safety?
 - all modifications or maintenance works will result in buildings which are equally or more fire safety compliant than they were before the works?
 - once modifications or maintenance works are complete, councillors will receive confirmation that the building will meet all necessary fire safety requirements?